

THE LENTEN SEASON

The Lenten season may not be the longest season in the church year but it is one of the most important seasons, if not the most important season, of the year. It is a time for spiritual preparation through repentance and growth in faith for Easter. It is the time of the church year when the passion and death of the Savior come into focus. It begins with a special day of repentance, Ash Wednesday, and ends in the depth of sorrow and tragedy on Good Friday. The name of the season, Lent, does not reflect the mood or message of the season. It is an old Anglo-Saxon word *Lencten* or *Lenchthen*, which means the lengthening of the days as spring appears. To preach meaningfully and properly, a preacher needs to know the message of Lent and feel its mood and spirit.

Development of the Season

Lent as a period of forty days came into being as a result of a long period of development. Originally in the first century Lent was only a period of forty hours in keeping with the forty hours Jesus' body was in the tomb. The forty-hour observance ended with an Easter service at 3 a.m. Later the forty hours grew into six days during the third century. The six days were not the last week in Lent but an extension of the forty hours. These six days were known as Holy Week, days of strict abstinence. Holy Week observance began in Jerusalem during the fourth century. Services were held on the appropriate day at the places where special events took place during the last week of Jesus' life: the Upper Room, Gethesemane, Pilate's Court, etc. When Holy Week was observed in the West, they substituted the stations of the cross for actual places in Jerusalem. Rome placed special emphasis upon the triduum: Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter. In the fourth century, the days of Holy Week were designated:

- Palm Sunday — entry into Jerusalem
- Monday — the cleansing of the temple
- Tuesday — the Discourse on the Mount of Olives
- Wednesday — Judas agreement
- Maundy Thursday — Upper Room meeting
- Good Friday — Calvary
- Saturday — the rest in the tomb

The six days grew into thirty-six days, as a tithe of the 365 days of the year. By approximately 731, the time of Charlemagne, four days were added to the thirty-six to make the present season of forty days. The four days consisted of Ash Wednesday to the First Sunday in Lent. The number forty was a popular and meaningful number: Jesus was tempted for forty days in the wilderness, Moses fasted forty days on Sinai, Elijah fasted forty days on the way to the mountain of God, and the Israelites spent forty years in the wilderness.

Sundays were never a part of Lent. We speak of the Sundays *in* Lent, not of Lent. The Sundays are known by their Latin names which come from the first Latin word of Introit: *Invocabit*, *Judica*, etc. However, the Lenten emphasis spilled over into the Sunday services in terms of the use of the penitential color, violet, and the dropping of the *Alleluia* and the *Gloria in Excelsis*.

This duration of Lent is not universal. The Eastern Orthodox church extends Lent over an eight-week period. Thursday, Saturday, and Sunday are not considered a part of Lent and are exempted as fast days.

The Date of Lent

Lent begins forty-six days before Easter in spite of the fact that Lent is a season of forty days. This is due to the fact that Sundays are not a part of Lent. When Lent begins, depends upon the date of Easter. In 325 the church decided that Easter would fall on the first Sunday after the full moon which occurs on or after March 21.

Ash Wednesday is the first day of Lent. The name, "Ash Wednesday," was given by Pope Urban II in 1099. Prior to this, the first day of Lent was known as "Beginning of the Fast." The day was set aside as a special day of repentance and as the opening of a season of repentance. "Ash" symbolized the repentance called for. Priests had the custom of sprinkling ashes on the heads of the faithful as they said, "Remember thou are dust and to dust

thou shalt return." The ashes came from the burned palms of the previous Palm Sunday. To this day, Roman Catholics on Ash Wednesday receive a smudge of ashes on their foreheads. Protestants dropped the custom because they felt it contradicted the Gospel for Ash Wednesday: "And when you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen of men." (Matthew 6:15-21)

Shrove Tuesday is the day before Ash Wednesday. "Shrove" referred to the shriving or cleansing of their sins by going to confession on this day. On the other hand, it was a day of feasting and for carnival. The French called it "Mardi Gras." The Germans had "Fasching" or "Fasch Nacht." It was a time to use up their store of fat which was forbidden during Lent. Thus, many Germans used up the fat by making doughnuts on Shrove Tuesday, and the English specialized in pancakes.

The Past Observance of Lent

In past centuries Lent was strictly observed and was a very meaningful season of the church year.

1. It was a time of preparation. Originally, Lent was the six-week period to prepare candidates for baptism at Easter. During this period of examination, instruction, penitence, and prayer, the candidates proved their worthiness for the sacrament of baptism. When Christianity was legalized in 325, Lent became a period of preparation for the entire people of God.

2. In the past, Lent was a period of penitence. It was a time for mourning, solemnity, and sadness. A hymn for Holy Week says, "to come and mourn with me awhile." The mood is expressed in the penitential color, violet, for this season, the same color as Advent. To remind the faithful of the nature of the season, a violet veil was hung between the nave and chancel. Often the altar cross was veiled in violet as a reminder of the penitential character of the season. In keeping with this somber mood, the "Alleluia" and the "Gloria in Excelsis" were omitted from the liturgy. Weddings during Lent were forbidden. Organs were stopped. Public entertainment was outlawed. Often royalty during Lent dressed in black. Lent was a time to be sorry for one's sins. It was also a time for the re-living of the sufferings of Christ. When one's Savior is on his way to death in your behalf, it is most unseemly to be frivolous and gay.

It was a time of fasting.
3. Fasting as a means of spiritual discipline was a part of past Lenten observance. From the time of the Apostles, Friday, the day of Jesus' death, was a day of fasting. During Holy Week, Good Friday and Holy Saturday were days of fasting. In the fourth century, fasting was extended to the entire period of Lent.

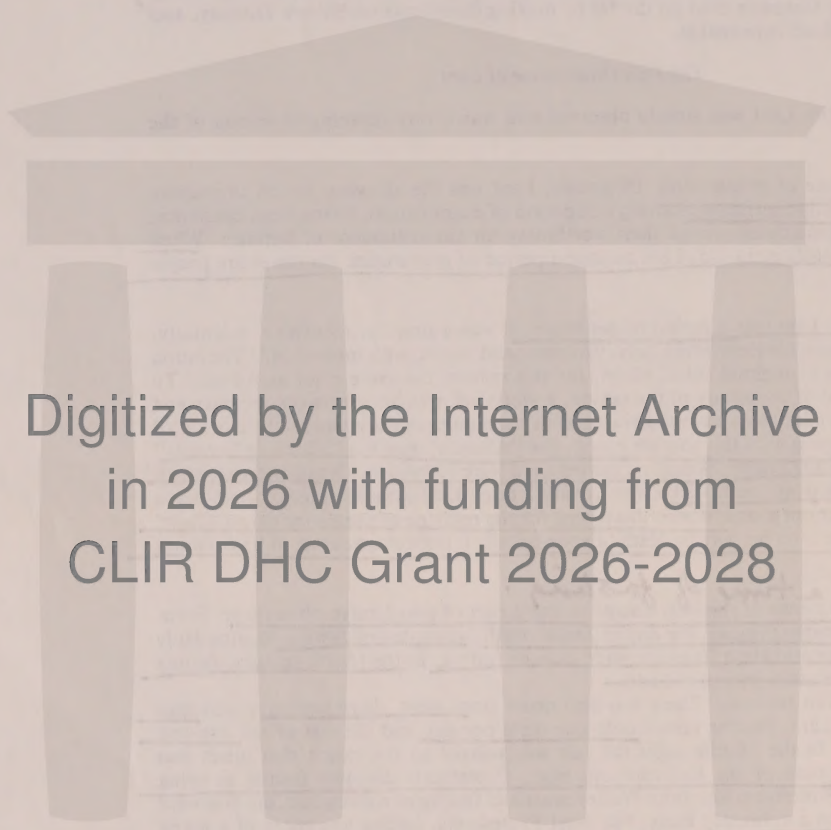
Fasting was taken seriously. There was abstinence from meat, dairy products, and eggs for the period of Lent. Fasting meant only one meal per day and the rest of the day one existed on water. In the Middle Ages the fast was relaxed to the extent that lunch was permitted. At the time of the Reformation, many Protestants dropped fasting as being "Popish." Some Protestants like John Wesley practiced fasting as a discipline, but if it were practiced, it was on a voluntary basis. For most Protestants, fasting was more of a token than a real denial of food.

The purpose of fasting was twofold. It was for personal discipline and for participation in the sufferings of Christ who in this season was on his way to Jerusalem to suffer and die. The second purpose of fasting was to render some service through fasting. There was a positive side to fasting; it was not only for personal benefit. Pope Leo I in 460 said, "What we forego by fasting is to be given as alms to the poor."

4. Lent was a time for special prayer. During Lent, devout Christians were concerned about the development of their spiritual lives. They gave extra time and effort to personal and public prayer. The traditional symbol for Lenten prayer is the pretzel. In Lent, Christians made dough of flour, salt, and water. They shaped the dough in the form of two crossed arms to remind themselves to pray. The bread was called "little arms" — "bracellae," later called "Brezel" or "Pretzel." Apparently it was an ancient practice, for there is a picture of a pretzel in a fifth century manuscript. Pretzels were a Lenten food and thus only eaten during the period as a reminder to pray more often.

The Present Observance of Lent

Especially among Protestants today, people are not sympathetic with the mood or



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methods of Lenten observance. Each year there is a cry by someone for a shorter Lenten period, the dropping of fasting, and the elimination of special Lenten services. Generally, Protestants ignore fasting as being superficial and meaningless. At Vatican II, Roman Catholics relaxed the rules for fasting: Meat may be eaten on Fridays and breakfast may be enjoyed before Holy Communion. People are too comfortable, lax, and affluent to be bothered about self-denial. Because attendance is very poor, many churches no longer have mid-week Lenten services. Many non-liturgical churches never had Lenten services. Moreover, Lent as a time for special personal devotions is not observed by most Christians today even though denominations may produce special Lenten devotional booklets for this purpose.

Lent can be the most fruitful season of the church year as the faithful strictly and sincerely observe the season. It can be a time of spiritual development and preparation for the resurrection.

1. *Penitence.* Lent is a period of self-denial and fasting, a period of spiritual discipline. Persons need this aspect of Lent because they have become flabby, affluent, and lazy. The theme of the day is, "You owe it to yourself," "Enjoy, Enjoy," "Let yourself go and live it up." Lent is a pilgrimage with Jesus to suffering and death. This involves discipline and self-denial. If we expect to rise with Christ in newness of life on Easter, we must first die with him, Lent is a time of learning to die to self. Before we can rejoice, we must mourn. Before we can live, we must die. The problem people face today is their willingness to die in order to live. In a world when crime multiplies, selfishness reigns, and sex dominates society, we need a period in which to repent and return to God. This is what Lent is for.

2. *Teaching.* Originally, Lent was a time for preparing candidates for baptism at Easter. Teaching them was part of their preparation. Lent today can be used to teach people through doctrinal sermons and Bible study both in groups and as individuals. Lent lends itself to a program of daily Bible reading. A series of sermons on the Creed is appropriate. Lent as a time of growth in the knowledge of the Lord is needed in a world of biblical illiteracy.

3. *Outreach.* During Lent, especially, the cross is uplifted. "And I, if I be lifted up, will draw all me to me." Christ died for the sins of all people. During Lent we witness to the cross and its meaning as redemption. This naturally leads to an outreach to the inactive and unchurched of the community. Through a Lenten program of evangelism, many new members may be received on Palm Sunday or Easter. Traditionally, Lent is the period of evangelism.

4. *Prayer.* Lent can be used today as a special period for extra prayer, both private and public. It calls for spending an extra period in personal prayer. It means scheduling additional services during the weeks of Lent. Through these spiritual exercises, a person is to have a closer walk with God and a dearer company with Christ. By the end of Lent, a person should be built up in his faith. Easter should find him more dedicated to God's work and more consecrated to Christ. As a period of spiritual stimulation, Lent can mean a retreat, a renewal, and a revival in the church.

Preaching During Lent

1. *Opportunity.* During Lent, preaching has its bonanza. Many preachers are in the pulpit as often between Ash Wednesday and Easter as they are in a normal period of six months. Lent can mean a full program of preaching at morning services, evening services, midweek Lenten services, Holy Week services, and possibly noonday Lenten services for business people. It is traditionally the time when series of sermons are presented on Lenten themes. Lent calls for a variety of preaching: meditative, doctrinal, evangelistic. It is the most important time for preaching because it deals with the passion and cross. These constitute the heart of the Christian faith. When the cross is preached, we deal with the fundamental problems and needs of life.

2. *Problem.* Preaching during Lent is becoming increasingly a problem for the minister who wants to get across the Lenten message. This is particularly the case if he follows the lectionary and church year.

Consider the ideal situation which existed in the past:

- a. Sunday mornings — preaching on the pericopes.
- b. Sunday evenings — preaching on the doctrines of the church.

- c. Midweek Lenten services — preaching on Lenten themes.
- d. Daily Holy Week services — preaching on the passion and death of Christ.

Consider the situation that exists today. Sunday evening services are on the way out for many churches. Midweek Lenten services are either very poorly attended or have been cancelled. If they are poorly attended, the preacher feels that the majority of his people are not hearing the message of the cross. Holy Week services are limited to Maundy Thursday when the Lord's Supper is administered and only a brief meditation on Communion is delivered, and to Good Friday when a series of very brief messages on the Last Seven Words by guest preachers are heard. If a minister follows the lectionary for Lent, when does he have the time and opportunity to preach the cross and dwell on the passion?

3. *Solutions.* The modern preacher confronting the above problem can find a solution in different approaches.

- a. Ideal situation. With courage and determination, he schedules a full program of services on Sundays and midweek. He uses the lectionary on Sunday mornings, doctrinal themes on Sunday evenings, provided they are held, and Lenten subjects at the midweek Lenten services.
- b. Lenten services on Sunday evenings. If it is utterly impossible to hold midweek Lenten services or, if held, impossible to get an acceptable attendance, the Lenten services might be held on Sunday evenings. It needs to be remembered that Sundays are not considered a part of Lent but are Sundays in Lent. Sundays are festival days. Accordingly, the lectionary does not deal with the passion and cross. A compromise may be made under the circumstances to hold the Lenten services on Sunday evenings.
- c. Sunday mornings. If it is possible to hold services during Lent only on Sunday mornings, the preacher may feel impelled to disregard the lectionary during Lent and preach on Lenten themes. This would be most regrettable, but it may be better than failing to deal with the passion and cross, the heart of our faith. Surely, the cross is to some extent in every sermon, but Lent is the time to give special and extended consideration to the sufferings and death of our Lord.

Lent and the New Lectionary

Aware of the changes that have taken place in today's observance of Lent, the new lectionary adjusts to the situation.

One change is in the name of the sixth Sunday in Lent, formerly known as "Palm Sunday," to Passion Sunday. In the old lectionary, Passion Sunday was the fifth Sunday in Lent. The change results from a realization of the fact that most churches neglect the history of the passion by not holding Holy Week services, the traditional time to deal with the passion. Now on the sixth Sunday, Palm Sunday, with its observance of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, is subordinated to Passion Sunday. The new lectionary suggests the observance of the triumphal entry as an introductory part of the service. The Gospel for the day is a lengthy one, giving the biblical account of the passion events. Since Holy Wednesday night's service, if one is held, usually deals with a cantata; and since Maundy Thursday is a celebration of the institution of the Lord's Supper, and since Good Friday's noon service consists of a brief meditation on the last seven words and the evening service is usually a Tenebrae service with no sermon, the one opportunity of Holy Week to preach on the Passion is Lent 6.

There is suggested a change also in the colors for Lent and Holy Week. The traditional color for Lent through Holy Week except Good Friday is purple. An alternate color for Ash Wednesday is black because on this day of repentance the Christian is to die to self. White is suggested as an alternate color on Maundy Thursday to celebrate the beginning of the Lord's Supper. During Holy Week, red is suggested in place of purple to remind people of the sacrifice being made that week. In place of black on Good Friday, it is suggested that an alternate color could be a deeper shade of red than used during Holy Week to reflect the blood of the cross shed for the redemption of the world.

LENT

Lent 1 — Lent is a testing time.

- L1 — Abraham's faith tested in the sacrifice of Isaac.
- L2 — Faith is tested by life's suffering and tragedy.
- G — Faith is tested by temptation.

Lent 2 — Lent is a time of suffering.

- L1 — God confronts Jacob while fleeing from wrath of Esau.
- L2 — Christians rejoice in their suffering for Christ.
- G — Jesus announces his forthcoming suffering in Jerusalem.

Lent 3 — Lent is a time of cleansing.

- L1 — Ten Commandments: the purity God expects of man.
- L2 — Necessary righteousness comes by faith in Christ.
- G — Jesus cleanses the temple of commercialism.

Lent 4 — Lent is a time of believing.

- L1 — Healing comes by looking in faith to serpent.
- L2 — Sinners are saved by grace through faith.
- G — Eternal life comes by faith in the cross.

Lent 5 — Lent is a time of sacrifice. and self denial

- L1 — Sacrificing the old covenant for a new one.
- L2 — Obedience comes from sacrifice.
- G — Through sacrifice comes glory.

Lent 6 — Lent is a time of opportunity.

- L1 — Your King comes to you — a promise.
- L2 — In humility Christ came to earth to die on cross.
- G — Christ comes to Jerusalem to be King-Messiah.

A Lenten Series Based on GospelsTheme: The Way of the Cross

- Lent 1 — Leads to the Testing of Faith.
- Lent 2 — Involves Suffering for Christians.
- Lent 3 — Includes Cleansing of the Heart.
- Lent 4 — Calls for Faith in the Cross.
- Lent 5 — Demands Sacrifice of Self.
- Lent 6 — Gives an Opportunity to Decide.

1. Jesus had the power or it wouldn't be a temptation. (Meryl Streep!)
2. Bread - get the people to follow for what they'll get out of it - economics. / or to use selfishly.
3. Temptation to compromise our values / political power
4. Temptation to sensualization.

Luke 4

We share the temptations. We share the power. We share the victory.

LIGHTING THE CANDLES

Table Mother: Blessed are you, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has blessed us by your commandments and commanded us to light the festival candles.

Table Father: Candles shine before us, stars in the skies
Wine in the glasses, light is in the eyes.
This is the seder of legend and light.

Blessing the Wine

Table Father: Behold this cup of wine! See its warm glow! Let it be a symbol of joy today as we celebrate our festival of freedom. Let us sanctify the wine. Blessed are you, O Lord our God, who creates the fruit of the wine.

Everyone: (Taking a drink of wine) With love you gave us, Our God, this feast of unleavened bread, which we keep as a memorial to our freedom from slavery in Egypt.

Tasting the Green Herbs

Table Father: Let us take a piece of green celery, dip it in salt water, and bless the greens as a symbol of spring.

Everyone: Blessed are you, O Lord our God, who creates the fruit of the earth. (All dip and eat greens.)

Dividing the Matzoh and Hiding Afikomen

Table Father: Now I break the middle matzah, wrap one part in a cloth, and hide it until our feast is over. This is called Afikomen.

Everyone: May those who are hungry come and eat with us.

THE FOUR QUESTIONS

Youngest Person at the Table: Why is this night different from all other nights? On all other nights we eat either leavened or unleavened bread; why on this night only unleavened bread?

Everyone: Our ancestors fled from Egypt in a great hurry. They had no time to bake their dough. But the sun baked it into flat, unleavened bread which they called matzah. To remember this we eat only matzah tonight.

Youngest: On all other nights we eat all kinds of vegetables. Why on this night do we eat bitter herbs especially?

Everyone: Our ancestors led bitter lives as slaves in Egypt. To remember their suffering we eat bitter herbs on Passover.

Youngest: On all other nights we do not dip one food into another. Why on this night do we dip greens in salt water and bitter herbs in haroset?

Everyone: We dip greens in salt water to remind us of the green that comes to life in the springtime. We did bitter herbs in sweet haroset as a sign of hope. Our ancestors survived the bitterness of slavery because it was sweetened by the hope of freedom.

Youngest: On all other nights everyone sits up straight at the table; why on this night may we recline at the table?

Everyone: In olden times, reclining at the table was the sign of a free person. We may recline at the table tonight to remind us that hundreds of years ago our ancestors were freed from slavery.



THE STORY OF PASSOVER

The story of the Jewish people in Egypt begins with Joseph. When Joseph succeeded in interpreting the Pharaoh's dreams, Joseph was rewarded by being appointed prince over the land. In that position, Joseph helped Egypt to survive during the years of hunger which he predicted would come. In fact, Joseph served Egypt so well that all the neighboring countries had to buy food from Egypt when the famine came.

The hunger in Israel also brought Jacob and his family to Egypt. They were seventy people in all. As time went by they grew in number until it seemed that they were everywhere.

After Joseph died a new Pharaoh arose. He disregarded the great contribution which Joseph had made to Egypt. He issued harsh decrees against the Israelites, made slaves out of them, and even ordered that every baby boy born to the Israelites be put to death.

Amram, the father of Miriam, was great in his generation. When he heard Pharaoh proclaim, "All the sons that are born ye shall cast into the Nile," Amram said, "We are toiling in vain," meaning that without male children there would be no children and no future. Amram divorced his wife, and other men, following his example, also divorced their wives.

Amram's daughter Miriam said to her father, "You have condemned us more than Pharaoh because he only condemned the males, but you condemned males and females. What Pharaoh decreed was only for this world, but your decree is for this and the next world. Pharaoh is a villain, so there is some doubt about whether his decree will be fulfilled, but you are a just man, so it is sure that your decree will be obeyed."

Amram listened to his daughter and took back his wife Yochevit. All his followers remarried their wives. The child Miriam and her brother Aaron sang and danced at the ceremony.

When Miriam was five, her mother was pregnant with Moses. Miriam prophesied and said, "My mother is about to bear a son who will save Israel from Egypt."

Our legends tell us that Pharaoh, in the time-honored pattern of oppressors, tried to get Jews to collaborate in murdering their own people. He summoned the top two midwives, Shifra and Pu-ah, commanding them to kill new-born Jewish males at birth and to report the birth of Jewish females so they could be raised to serve his brothels. The midwives did not carry out Pharaoh's command. Instead of murdering the infants, they took special care of them. If a woman was poor, they went around to the other women, collecting food for her and the child.

When Pharaoh asked them to account for all the living children, they made up the story that Jewish women gave birth so fast that they did not summon midwives, so the midwives could not get to the children.

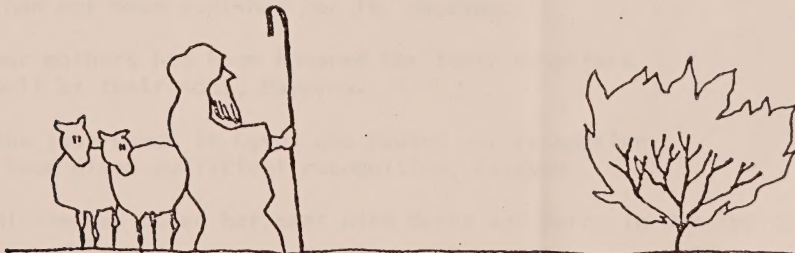
On the day Moses was born, the house was filled with light. Her father kissed Miriam on the head and said, "Your prophecy was fulfilled." Three months later her brother was thrown into the Nile.

Her father hit her on the head and asked, "Daughter, now where is your prophecy?" That is why it is said in the Bible, "The child's sister took her stand at a distance to see what would happen to him."

But Moses was saved from Pharaoh's evil decree by his mother's courage and love. By a strange twist of events, he was discovered by the Pharaoh's daughter and taken by her to live in the house of Pharaoh. There he could have lived peacefully and happily, enjoying the wealth, the protection and the excitement of the palace.

But Moses saw the suffering of the Israelite slaves and he felt pain in his heart for them. One day when he saw an Egyptian task-master beating an Israelite slave, Moses could not control his anger, and he killed the Egyptian. Moses now had to run away from Egypt. He fled to Midian where he became a shepherd.

One day, while he was looking after his sheep, he heard the voice of God calling to him from a bush. Moses answered: "Here I am." Then, according to the Torah, God spoke to him. God told him to go to Pharaoh and to bring the Children of Israel out of Egypt.



Despite Moses' plea and the threat of God's punishment, Pharaoh stubbornly refused to free the Israelite slaves. One plague after another was brought upon the Egyptians. After each one, Pharaoh would promise to obey God's command. But as soon as the plague had passed and relief came, Pharaoh changed his mind. Only after the tenth and most horrible plague, the death of the first-born, did Pharaoh finally agree to let the Israelites go.

Leader: The song "Dayeynu" tells of all the steps in the liberation of the Jews from Egypt and culminating in the return to the land of Israel.

All: (ALL JOIN IN CHANTING THE REFRAIN DAYEYNU WHICH MEANS: "FOR THAT ALONE WE SHOULD HAVE BEEN GRATEFUL.")

Eelu hotzianu meemitzrayim, dayeynu.

Eelu natan lanu et hashabat, dayeynu.

Eelu natan lanu et hatorah, dayeynu.

Eelu hichneesanu l'erezt yisrael,
dayeynu.

If God had brought us out of Egypt
But had not split the sea for us, Dayeynu.

If God had given us the Sabbath
But had not brought us to Mt. Sinai, Dayey!

If God had given us the Torah
But had not brought us to the land of Israel, Dayeynu.

If God had brought us to the land of Israel,
But had not built the Holy Temple, Dayeynu.

A Woman's Dayeynu

Had She brought us out of Egypt
But not executed judgements on them, Dayeynu.

Had She executed judgements on them
But not upon their gods, Dayeynu.

If Eve had been acknowledged as Adam's equal
And not been considered a temptress, Dayeynu.

If she were the first woman to eat from the tree of knowledge
And had been recognized as bringing knowledge to us, Dayeynu.

If Lot's wife had been honored for compassion in looking back
At the fate of her family in Sodom
And had not been punished for it, Dayeynu.

If our mothers had been honored for their daughters
As well as their sons, Dayeynu.

If the just women in Egypt who caused our redemption
Had been given sufficient recognition, Dayeynu.

If Miriam had taken her seat with Moses and Aaron in our legacy, Dayeynu.

If women had been among the writers of the Bible
And had interpreted our creation and our role in history, Dayeynu.

If women had written the Haggadah and placed our mothers where
They belong in history, Dayeynu.

If every generation of women with every generation of men
Would continue to go out of Egypt, Dayeynu.

Let My People Go
When Israel was in Egypt's land,
Let my people go!
Oppressed so hard they could not stand,
Let my people go!

Go down, Moses
Way down in Egypt's land.
Tell old Pharaoh
Let my people go!

"Thus saith the Lord", bold Moses said,
Let my people go!
"If not I'll strike your first-born dead",
Let my people go!

Love and Valentine's Day reminds me that same-sex love has been around for a long time. Walt Whitman wrote some beautiful poetry describing his feelings for another man. A favorite is this:

WHEN I HEARD AT THE CLOSE OF THE DAY

When I heard at the close of the day how my name had been received with plaudits
in the capitol, still it was not a happy night for me that follow'd,
And else when I carous'd, or when my plans were accomplish'd, still I was not
happy,
But the day when I rose at dawn from the bed of perfect health, refresh'd,
singing, inhaling the ripe breath of autumn,
When I saw the full moon in the west grow pale and disappear in the morning
light,
When I wander'd alone over the beach, and undressing bathed, laughing with the
cool waters, and saw the sun rise,
And when I thought how my dear friend my lover was on his way coming, O then I
was happy,
O then each breath tasted sweeter, and all that day my food nourish'd me more,
and the beautiful day pass'd well,
And the next came with equal joy, and with the next at evening came my friend,
And that night while all was still I heard the waters roll slowly continually up
the shores,
I heard the hissing rustle of the liquid and sands as directed to me whispering
to congratulate me,
For the one I love most lay sleeping by me under the same cover in the cool
night,
In the stillness of the autumn moonbeams his face was inclined toward me,
And his arm lay lightly around my breast -- and that night I was happy.

And in the Bible, one woman said to another:

Entreat me not to leave thee, nor to keep from following after thee; for whither
thou goest, I will go, and where thou lodgest, I will lodge. Thy people shall
be my people, and thy God my God. Where thou diest, I will die, and there will
I be buried. The Lord do so and more beside, if ought save death part me and
thee.

If I have all human or angelic eloquence, but speak without love, I am simply a gong booming or a cymbal clashing. If I have the gift of prophecy, understanding all the mysteries there are, and knowing everything, and if I have faith in all its fullness enough to move mountains, but am without love, then I am nothing at all. If I give away all that I possess, piece by piece, and if I even let them take my body to be burned, but am without love, it will do me no good whatsoever.

Love is always patient and kind; it is never jealous. Love is never boastful or conceited; it is never rude or selfish. Love does not take offense, and is not resentful. Love takes no pleasure in other people's sins but delights in the truth. It is always ready to excuse, to trust, to hope and to endure whatever comes.

Love does not come to an end. But if there are gifts of prophecy, the time will come when they must fail; or if one has the gift of tongues, it will not continue forever. If one has all knowledge, this too must fail. For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecying is imperfect; but once perfection comes, all imperfect things will disappear. When I was a child, I used to talk like a child, thought like a child, argued like a child; but now I am grown, and all childish ways are put behind me. Now we are seeing a dim reflection in a mirror, but then we shall be seeing face to face. Now the knowledge that I have is imperfect, but then I shall know as fully as I am known.

In short, there are three things that abide: faith, hope, and love; and the greatest of these is love.

M.D.

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CHART COPY

It is I have all human or angelic eloquence, but speak without love, I am simply a young person or a cynical thinking. It is I have the gift of prophecy, and I have faith in all the mysteries there are, and knowing everything, and it is I have faith in all the business enough to move mountains, but am without love, then I am nothing at all. If I give away all that I possess, piece by piece, and if I even let them take my body to be burned, but am without love, it will do me no good whatever.

Love is always patient and kind; it is never jealous. Love is never boastful or conceited; it is never rude or selfish. Love does not care for others, and is not resentful. Love takes no pleasure in other people's sins, but delights in the truth. It is always ready to excuse, to trust, to hope, and to endure whatever comes.

Love does not care for its end, but if there are things of goodness, it will not come when they must fall; or if one has the gift of prophecy, it will not pronounce falsehood. If one has all knowledge, this too must fall. For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecies are imperfect; but once perfection comes, all imperfect things will disappear. When I was a child, I used to talk like a child, thought like a child, argued like a child; but now I am grown, and all childish ways are put behind me. Now we are seeing a bit reflected in a mirror, but then we shall be seeing face to face. Now the knowledge that I have is imperfect, but then I shall know as fully as I am known. In short, there are three things that abide: faith, hope, and love; and the greatest of these is love.

FROM THE EDITOR

I was thinking about God the other day -- and I guess these days not enough of us do think about God -- when a story came to mind. An elderly couple were out for a Sunday drive. It was a beautiful day in late spring, and everything was fresh and full of life. The wife was gazing out of the window and was suddenly taken back in memory to her youth, when she and her husband were first married. At this point she turned and said to him, "Honey, do you remember when we were young, when we first started going for drives on Sunday afternoon." He grinned and said, "Sure do." "Well, do you remember how we sat close and you wrapped your arm around my shoulder?" He again indicates that he did, indeed, remember. "Why isn't it like that anymore?" she asked. The husband reached out and pulled her closer to him, saying, "I'm still here; I haven't moved at all." That story seems to reflect how it is with God and ourselves. God is always there and never moves. We are the ones who move away -- then one day we realize the distance between God and ourselves. If we will call out, then we find God smiling on us and ready with love and forgiveness. God is always reading to bring us back into contact and make us feel the warmth and comfort again.

Where is God in your life? Have you turned away? Call out -- let God know that you need to come back and be wrapped once again in those loving arms. God's love is ready to welcome you back.

DID YOU KNOW?

Here it is February and Valentine's Day is just around the corner. Love is in the air and lovers are thinking about spring and relationships, and being in love is once more fashionable. So -- by the way -- is commitment. MCC honors commitment, and believes that people grow by making and keeping commitments. Someone once said that anyone can love 20 people in a year, the trick is to love one person for 20 years! If you have a committed relationship that has lasted over time, maybe you'd like to think about celebrating that relationship with a commitment or covenant ceremony. MCC performs a rite called a "Holy Union" which does just that -- celebrates commitment. We require first that the two people acknowledge that the relationship is intended to be a long-term commitment (and we even think of these as "life partnerships") and that they will be sharing their lives in a very personal covenant, which transcends any other relationship. Secondly, we ask that the relationship be in existence for at least a year, or that they have spent six months living together, and know that the relationship can withstand the everyday tensions of life under one roof. Third, we ask that you be willing to undergo some probing into how your relationship works, so that the person who performs the ceremony can do so with a sense of integrity, knowing that the relationship is indeed a solid one.

If this interests you, please call Rev. Marge at 476-9142 and talk about what a Holy Union might mean in your life and how it might make your relationship better for both of you. Celebrating life and love is a wonderful way to announce to your friends (and maybe even your family) that your love is here to stay.

FROM THE PASTOR

In getting this newsletter together, some interesting thoughts began to go through my head -- I was thinking of Valentine's Day and Mardi Gras and remembering sweet and funny things that had happened to me over the years at both of these verge of Spring holidays. Then I got to thinking about how many people had never experienced Mardi Gras, and I began remembering the many, many times I had stood on street corners with my hands in the air, yelling "Hey, mister, throw me something!" which is the cry in New Orleans, and last year beginning to understand why signs all over Mobile suddenly say "Moon Pie," and the excitement as Missy (my daughter) and I caught Moon Pies and laughed and tucked them in our pockets and counted them later on the dining room table and were filled with a sense of joy and goodness and beneficence.

Mardi Gras is humanity being silly and feeling extravagant throwing candy and Moon Pies (in Mobile) or toys and necklaces (in New Orleans) and having a wonderful sense that foolishness and generosity are good for people from time to time.

We in the Christian world live in a cycle that recreates each year the wonder of the life of Christ -- Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Pentecost -- each season calling us to special meditations on the Christian life. Advent is a time of preparation and expectation of the coming of the Christ child, Christmas celebrates his birth, Epiphany (which means "God with us") announces the presence of God in our world in the form of the Christ. Lent prepares us for his death, burial and resurrection at Easter. Mardi Gras was once an important part of that cycle. "Fat Tuesday" was in medieval times the day on which one used up greases and fats which had been collected (usually in England in the form of pancake breakfasts) so that no meats or meat fats would be in the house during Lent. It was also usually the last time that candies and sweets would be eaten from Lent to Easter, and, of course, this is why sweets are thrown in the parades (and why Easter candy was so important). "Shrove Tuesday" derives from the word to shrive, to confess and be given absolution -- and it was on this day that penitents went to confession and prepared themselves to enter Lent with pure hearts. All of these ideas point to a much simpler time, when people's faith was a part of their daily living pattern, carried out in what they ate as well as in what they believed.

I'm sometimes surprised when Fundamentalist Christians talk about the "pagan" holiday of Mardi Gras and want to do away with it (but, of course, they would do away with Lent as well). Somehow, I think they have got it backwards. I'd like to see Lent be so special and maybe so solemn a time that people would indeed understand that being God's fools was part of the prelude to the solemnity. The contrast was what was important, and Carnival season (from 12th Night or Little Christmas, or King's Day, however January 7th was known around the Christian world to Mardi Gras) was a time of jollity between the solemnity and quiet joy of Christmas to the even deeper solemnity of Lent.

We, in the Gay community, with our understanding of masks and costumes have adopted the two holidays which allow dressing up and masking, Hallowe'en and Mardi Gras, as special times. They have become almost national holidays in our community, and we know each other behind the masks and understand, in some deep place, an even deeper reason for them. We, who have had to "wear the mask" now do so in fun and frivolity. At other times of the year, we do it with far more seriousness. God sees behind the mask and knows the pure in heart. Dear ones, Mardi Gras is our season; live, love, laugh and be happy. "Hey, mister, throw me something," and since this is Mobile, I hope it's a devil's food Moon Pie!

